

## Battle Analysis

# Surrounded Again: The Successful Defense of 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion at Arracourt

by CPT Jerry V. Drew II

While in command of Third Army's battle across France, LTG George Patton incorporated "no fewer than six corps and 42 divisions" into his operation.<sup>1</sup> Among these divisions, few battalions distinguished themselves as greatly as 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion, Combat Command A, 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, XII Corps, which served at the head of Third Army's advance from the Normandy breakthrough July 25, 1944, until following the Battle of Arracourt Oct. 12, 1944.<sup>2</sup>

The Battle of Arracourt in its entirety was a series of offensive and defensive actions lasting Sept. 14-29, 1944. Within this larger action, the Arracourt Tank Battle, "one of the bitterest tank battles of the entire war," took place Sept. 19-22.<sup>3</sup> During the Arracourt Tank Battle, 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion was successful because it maximized its adherence to what we now call the characteristics of the defense.

## Eisenhower's 'broad front'

Before the Allied invasion of Europe, GEN Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied commander, had decided on a strategy that would employ multiple army groups across the breadth of France.<sup>4</sup> This "broad front policy" required Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group to drive northwest from Normandy; secure the enemy V-2 rocket-launch sites that had continually harassed Londoners; occupy Belgium's airfields and deny their use to the Luftwaffe; and open the deep-water port of Antwerp for Allied shipping – tasks that Eisenhower hoped would gain public support and allow the Allies to base air and resupply operations on the continent instead of from Britain.<sup>5</sup> Third Army, a part of GEN Omar Bradley's 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group, would send forces west from Normandy to secure the port of Brest, but the majority of its thrust would be across France south of Paris, passing through the Argonne region, crossing the Meuse and Moselle rivers in Lorraine, and entering Germany east of the city of Metz.<sup>6</sup>

Eisenhower hoped that a swift advance along a broad front would "complete the destruction of the enemy forces in the West" and allow the Allies "to strike directly into the heart of the German homeland."<sup>7</sup> Even Eisenhower, however, did not anticipate the speed with which his armored forces drove back the Germans.

Following the Allied invasion of Normandy, Patton had arrived in France July 6, with "thousands of his Third Army troops" arriving throughout the rest of the month.<sup>8</sup> Third Army, although operating during the breakout, became "officially operational" Aug. 1 and soon began its drive eastward.<sup>9</sup> Just one month later, Third Army had reached the Meuse River – "so rapid was the Allied advance and so complete the disintegration of the German field forces" that Third Army often had captured the Supreme Headquarters' objectives before it received the orders to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Timeliness of orders, however, was not the only problem Supreme Headquarters encountered. Due to the speed of their advances and the distances they had covered, the field armies had outrun their logistical support. On Sept. 2, Eisenhower ordered his commanders to "remain 'generally static' until enough gasoline and other supplies could be accumulated 'to permit Third Army and V Corps of First Army to move to the Siegfried Line and seize and hold that line with at least a part of each corps.'"<sup>11</sup> Until the gas arrived, Patton needed to keep his forces, with the exception of his Cavalry, west of the Meuse River.<sup>12</sup>

## Nancy and Arracourt

On Sept. 4, Patton sent instructions to MG Manton Eddy, XII Corps commander, to move toward the Moselle River (at that point less than 10 miles beyond the Meuse), capture the town of Nancy and establish a bridgehead over the Saar River beyond that.<sup>13</sup> BG John Wood, 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division commander, tasked COL Bruce Clarke and his Combat Command A (CCA) to "pass through the bridgehead of 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division with the objective of the high ground in the vicinity of Arracourt."<sup>14</sup>

CCA and its sister commands, Combat Command B (CCB) and Combat Command Reserve (CCR), were organizations analogous to a modern brigade combat team. These units were the division's "strike forces [and] were set up to control a number of combat units."<sup>15</sup>

Upon its arrival at Arracourt, 4<sup>th</sup> Division and its three combat commands were still on the offensive. The temporary halt at the Meuse River had slowed its operational tempo, allowing the German Fifth Panzer Army's LVIII Panzer Corps – with assistance from 113<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade and available troops of 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division – to regroup and prepare a counteroffensive.<sup>16</sup> As Third Army's lead, 4<sup>th</sup> Division was the only unit that had successfully made it across the Nancy bridgehead before the counterattack came and isolated it from follow-on forces.<sup>17</sup>

On Sept. 14, CCA's mission "was to exploit the area around Arracourt – capture supplies and prisoners, establish roadblocks and ambushes, and secure key bridges."<sup>18</sup> The 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion took the lead. LTC Creighton "Abe" Abrams, 37<sup>th</sup>'s commander, "used his senior tank company commander to start the day's operations."<sup>19</sup> That commander was CPT William Spencer of Company A, a seasoned veteran who proved his worth multiple times throughout the Arracourt action and who earned the Distinguished Service Cross.<sup>20</sup> Spencer's company led the battalion toward Arracourt to seize the bridges that crossed the Rhine-Marne Canal.<sup>21</sup> At the town of Valhey, 37<sup>th</sup> "cleared the town of eight 88mm anti-tank guns and 300 Germans," then continued to its objective.<sup>22</sup>

By the next day, Sept. 15, German forces had recaptured the bridgehead from the Americans, effectively isolating 4<sup>th</sup> Division east of the Moselle.<sup>23</sup> Clarke sent forces to the west to aid 80<sup>th</sup>'s fight for the bridge at the risk of thinning his own dispersed force.<sup>24</sup> Elements of Company B established blocking positions "to prevent Germans from escaping east out of Nancy."<sup>25</sup> CPT Richard Lamison's Company C "formed a combat outpost around the crossroads village of Lezey – between four and five miles northeast of Arracourt."<sup>26</sup>

Beginning Sept. 18, much of the rest of the 37<sup>th</sup>, including Spencer's Company A, was operating under the command of the battalion executive officer MAJ William Hunter. Hunter's task force had joined CCR in an effort to retain Luneville, a town about 10 kilometers south of Arracourt.<sup>27</sup> On the morning of the major German offensive that began the Arracourt Tank Battle Sept. 19, the 37<sup>th</sup> was conducting split operations.

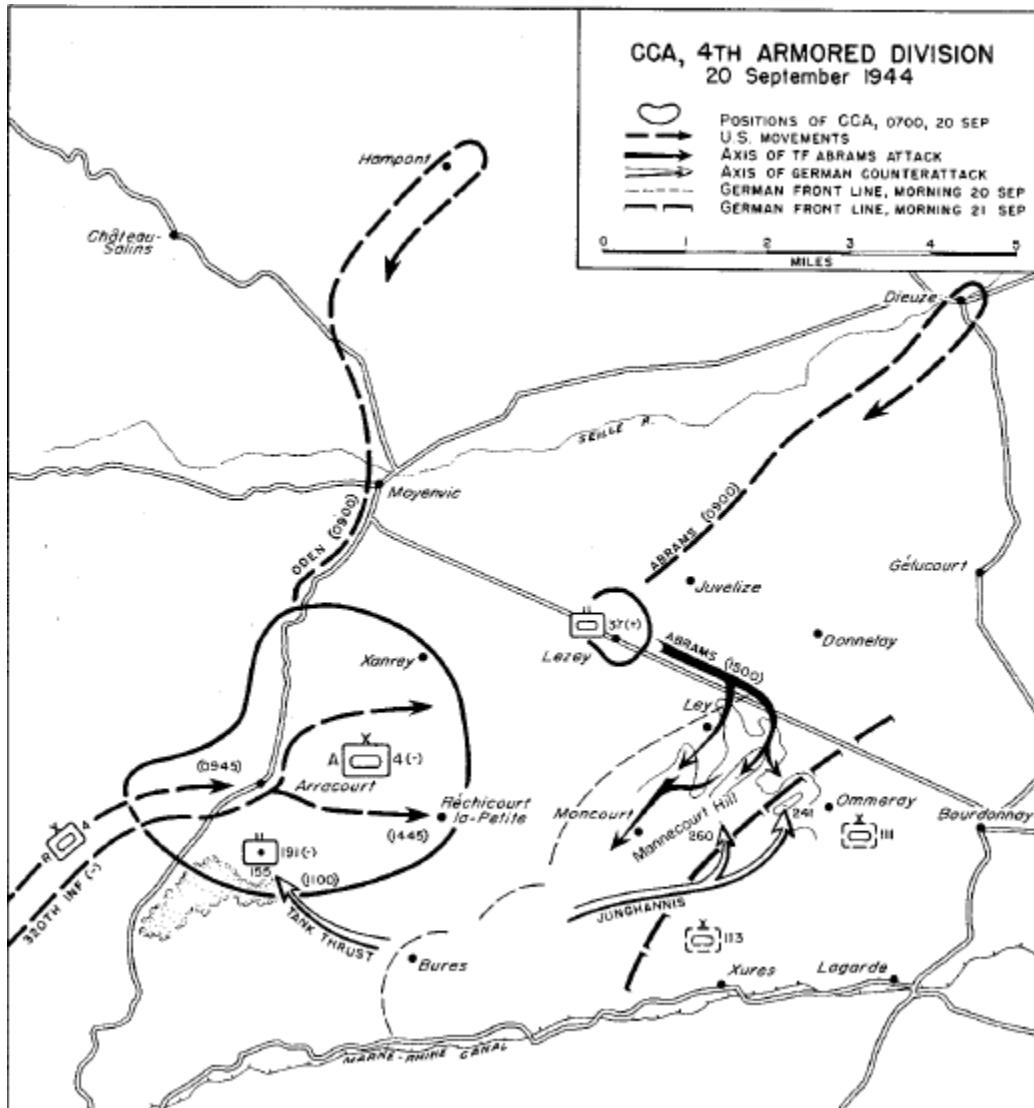


Figure 1. CCA's position's Sept. 20, 1944. The large German panzer counterattack sent expressly to stop the advance of LTG George S. Patton Jr.'s Third Army was defeated by elements of the U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division at the Battle of Arracourt. (From the U.S. Army official history *The Lorraine Campaign*.)

### Arracourt Tank Battle

CPT William Dwight, 37<sup>th</sup>'s liaison officer to CCA, first realized his battalion was under attack shortly after 7 a.m. Sept. 19.<sup>28</sup> He returned to CCA headquarters, assembled a platoon of tank destroyers and prepared to defend the road leading to the 37<sup>th</sup>'s positions.<sup>29</sup> After an intense engagement that left nine Panzers and three of Dwight's four tank destroyers in flames, elements of the 37<sup>th</sup> arrived to rescue the survivors, including Dwight.<sup>30</sup> Dwight's actions delayed the onslaught but did not stop it. Upon realizing that an enemy penetration was imminent, Clarke called for CPT James "Jimmie" Leach of Company B to leave Chambrey and report to him at Arracourt.<sup>31</sup> Believing the message to be routine, Leach preceded his company, rendezvousing with an exasperated Clarke, who met him with "Where the hell is your company?"<sup>32</sup> The division artillery was already engaging "20 or 25" tanks, and upon the arrival of his platoons, Leach led a counterattack, causing the Germans to retreat over a ridge.<sup>33</sup> Company B lost three tanks in the engagement but sustained no casualties.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, Company A received orders to depart the Luneville area "early on the 19<sup>th</sup> and arrived in the Arracourt area about [1 p.m.]."<sup>35</sup> With Companies A and B reunited, Hunter launched a counterattack on the Germans whom Leach had earlier driven behind the ridge and encountered "an assembly area of 15 to 20 Mark V Panzers."<sup>36</sup> With

Company A fixing the enemy force, Company B “went around to the flank and ran right through the Panzer area firing, wheeled around and ran back through it.”<sup>37</sup> Spencer lost three tanks, one of them his own, but the battle having culminated, he sent the rest of his company with Hunter to exploit the task force’s success while he searched for survivors on foot.<sup>38</sup> He found eight men and led them “back to the battalion area ... arriving there with all of them about [10 p.m.]”<sup>39</sup>

Miraculously, Company B emerged from this counterattack unscathed. Leach would lead one more counterattack later that day, successfully preventing the Germans from capturing CCA’s supply trains.<sup>40</sup>

The actions of the 37<sup>th</sup> were typical of what was happening throughout CCA’s sector. Clarke – retaining his artillery near the center of the perimeter, massing his armored forces at the most vulnerable points and sending “quick forays out at night to hit the fortified enemy-held towns and return fast inside the perimeter” – maintained CCA’s position.<sup>41</sup> The 37<sup>th</sup> engaged in multiple sweeps through the surrounding countryside to mop up remaining pockets of enemy infantry. When the 37<sup>th</sup> assembled near Lezey that evening, “49 blackened German tanks were smoking the sky.”<sup>42</sup>

The 37<sup>th</sup> encountered the enemy again on the following day, Sept. 20. Task Force Abrams, consisting of 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion and several attachments, moved toward the town of Dieuze, but upon hearing news of a tank attack at Arracourt, returned to clear the area.<sup>43</sup> Lamison’s Company C encountered elements of the 111<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade reserve. Lamison “lost five or six tanks but inflicted about the same number of tank casualties on the enemy” before withdrawing and allowing Abrams to maneuver Company B against the remaining elements of the reserve.<sup>44</sup> Abrams then turned his attack “southward, taking Moncourt and then bivouacking with his main body back at Lezey.”<sup>45</sup>

The 111<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade reared its head again Sept. 22. Combining direct fire from the tanks, indirect fire from CCA’s artillery and P-47s from XIX Tactical Air Command, Abrams led 37<sup>th</sup> Tank and 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion in the attack to recapture the town of Juvelize.<sup>46</sup> The mass of Task Force Abrams assaulted Juvelize while Spencer led the seizure of the “the hill at Les Trois Croix.”<sup>47</sup> Company A’s seven tanks attacked “22 enemy tanks. Company A lost one tank and destroyed 17; only five enemy escaped.”<sup>48</sup> After seizing Juvelize, “only seven tanks and [80] men were left in 111<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade.”<sup>49</sup> Thus ended what has become known as the Arracourt Tank Battle, but the larger Battle of Arracourt continued.

Elements of the German First Army attacked again Sept. 24, primarily against CCB’s sector. The 37<sup>th</sup> Tank defended Juvelize a second time Sept. 25, but it enjoyed superior numbers and elevated positions overwatching the German avenues of approach; the 37<sup>th</sup> repelled the assault with relative ease. At this point, the 37<sup>th</sup> was the furthest forward unit in Third Army. Attacks continued until Sept. 29, but 4<sup>th</sup> Division continued to attrit German forces until Fifth Panzer Army realized that it no longer had hope of recapturing the Moselle bridgehead. The 4<sup>th</sup> resumed defensive positions until becoming corps reserve Oct. 12 after relief by 26<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>50</sup>

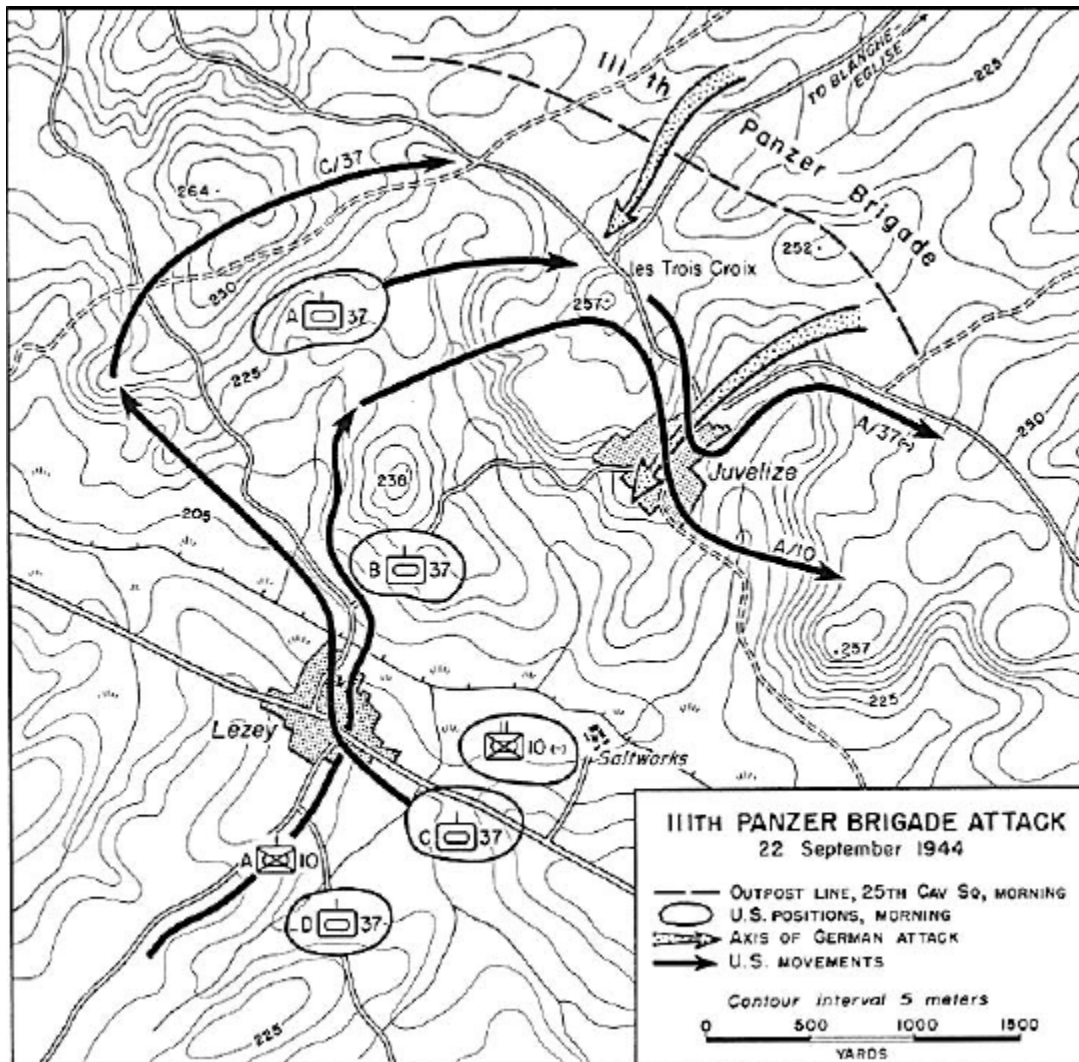


Figure 2. German attacks Sept. 22, 1944.

### Textbook example

Following World War II, the actions of 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division around Arracourt became textbook example of a successful mobile defense. The 4<sup>th</sup> achieved its aims through the employment of CCA, CCB and CCR. Within the combat commands, primarily CCA but also during actions while attached to CCR, the 37<sup>th</sup> maximized its use of the characteristics of defense: maneuver, flexibility, disruption, mass and concentration, preparation and security.<sup>51</sup>

Most important to 37<sup>th</sup>'s success was its ability to maneuver and its flexibility. Maneuver is the "employment of forces in the operational area through movement in combination with fires to achieve a position of advantage in respect to the enemy."<sup>52</sup> The battalion remained flexible, adapting its plans to the situation at hand, often reacting to last-minute radio reports from forward positions or its artillery-spotting aircraft. Perhaps the clearest example of the importance of these two characteristics is the ad hoc counterattack by Hunter Sept. 19 in which he maneuvered both Companies A and B against the assembly of German Mark Vs. Abrams employed Companies B and C similarly the following day in the react-to-contact encounter in the vicinity of Ley, and even company independent actions such as Company B's attack to rescue the baggage trains depended on maneuver and flexibility for their success.

Second, mass and concentration remained critical throughout. When using mass and concentration, "defenders seek to mass the effects of overwhelming combat power where they choose and shift it to support the decisive operation."<sup>53</sup> The 37<sup>th</sup> displayed this characteristic whenever possible, but it was not always possible. Dwight's

heroic procurement of four tank destroyers to fend off an approaching column of Panzers was a situation in which mass and concentration were not possible. The action around Juvelize, however, provides an example of the use of mass and concentration to great effect. Abrams not only massed an infantry battalion and a tank battalion at the decisive moment, but he incorporated the effects of the combat command's artillery and XIX Tactical Air Force's attack aircraft.

Juvelize also provides an instance of the defensive characteristic of disruption. Abrams did not pour all his forces into the decisive point at Juvelize, nor did all the action happen in a single engagement. Abrams knew that to be successful, he would have to integrate all assets at his disposal, including the terrain, to upset the "enemy's formation or tempo, interrupt his timetable or cause enemy forces to commit prematurely or attack in piecemeal fashion."<sup>54</sup> The CCA artillery and the attack aircraft were critical in disrupting the enemy attack throughout the task force's maneuver. Also, Company A's occupation of the Trois Croix, key terrain to the northeast of the city, disrupted the enemy on the approach with direct fire while Abrams' decisive operation achieved the seizure of the town itself.

In an operation in which German forces so greatly outnumbered American forces, the 37<sup>th</sup> used operations in depth to great effect. Operations in depth are the "simultaneous application of combat power throughout the area of operations."<sup>55</sup> On Sept. 15, for example, elements of Company B were manning blocking positions east of the Moselle while Company C "formed a combat outpost around the crossroads village of Lezey – between four and five miles northeast of Arracourt."<sup>56</sup> Abrams and the 37<sup>th</sup> were covering the maximum amount of battlespace possible while still remaining responsive to CCA's needs. Three days later, Company B was operating near Chambrey while Company A was attached to CCR near Luneville, but both companies were able to converge on Arracourt when that became the most vulnerable sector of the perimeter.<sup>57</sup> Being able to maneuver those companies via internal lines toward alternate engagement areas allowed 37<sup>th</sup> to fend off a disproportionately large adversary and defend a disproportionately large area. These were operations in depth well executed.

The 37<sup>th</sup> also used preparation throughout its operations. It had crossed the Moselle Sept. 14 and engaged in hostilities throughout the rest of the operation. Because the German counterattack had isolated 37<sup>th</sup> by the next day and because the vast amount of area that 4<sup>th</sup> Division defended required a mobile defense, preparations were not deliberate in the way they would be in a static defense. For example, no sources recount the establishment of dug-in platoon battle positions or reinforced mine-wire obstacles. As mentioned previously, maneuver was the most essential aspect of 37<sup>th</sup>'s ability to defend successfully. Its preparation came in other forms – logistics and reconnaissance. During the early days of operating in Brittany, Clarke had learned what it required to continue operations while outpacing one's support system.<sup>58</sup> CCA always moved with its "supply trains attached, and supply trucks would always be overloaded by at least 50 percent. Seven days' rations on every tank for its crew became standard."<sup>59</sup>

Preparation measures also included reconnaissance by mounted forces and by aircraft. Radio reports from these elements allowed 37<sup>th</sup> to shift to the most critical parts of the perimeter in a timely manner.

Finally, 37<sup>th</sup> maintained its security. In the case of Arracourt, the primary means of security was aggressive patrolling and the use of mutually reinforcing positions. Security also came from the active employment of reconnaissance forces as a means of providing early warning. Because security also includes military deception, one final story from Arracourt bears recounting. Upon realizing the Germans were no longer able to recapture the Nancy bridgehead, Clarke made the decision to withdraw. Clarke accomplished the withdrawal of the 37<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> by staging a fake battle, complete with sound effects, over the radio so that German intelligence could intercept it, but instead of the "blazing forward attack" the Germans expected, the 10<sup>th</sup> withdrew to a supporting position on the new perimeter, allowing for the withdrawal of the 37<sup>th</sup> to the rear.<sup>60</sup>

The actions of 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion have become prime historical examples of the employment of the characteristics of the defense. Certain characteristics such as maneuver, mass and concentration, flexibility and disruption become more obvious in an examination of the conduct of 37<sup>th</sup>'s operations as part of a mobile defense, but Abrams, Hunter, Spencer, Leach and Lamison certainly applied operations in depth, preparation and security considerations as well. The Battle of Arracourt covered a vast area and spanned more than two weeks. As such, it provides examples of nearly every type of military operation. The success of 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion at Arracourt during the battle and afterward, however, was due to its ability to operationalize the characteristics of defense.



**Figure 3. Commemorative monument at the battle site. (From Wikimedia Commons)**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Forty, *Patton's Third Army at War*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> H.M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, Part 3 of *European Theater of Operations* (U.S. Army's historical series *United States Army in World War II*), Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Forty; Cole.

<sup>7</sup> Cole.

<sup>8</sup> Forty.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Cole.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *The Nancy Bridgehead*, Washington, DC: Superintendent of Documents, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Forty.

<sup>16</sup> Cole.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> William Donohue Ellis and Thomas J. Cunningham Jr., *Clarke of St. Vith: The Sergeants General*, Cleveland: Dillon/Liederbach, 1974.

- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Forty.
- <sup>21</sup> Ellis.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Cole.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Forty; Cole.
- <sup>28</sup> Forty.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ellis and Cunningham.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Forty.
- <sup>36</sup> Ellis and Cunningham.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Forty.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ellis and Cunningham.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ellis and Cunningham; Cole.
- <sup>43</sup> Cole.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Forty.
- <sup>49</sup> Cole.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2012.
- <sup>52</sup> ADRP 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2013.
- <sup>53</sup> ADRP 3-90.
- <sup>54</sup> ADRP 1-02.
- <sup>55</sup> ADRP 3-90.
- <sup>56</sup> Cole.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Ellis and Cunningham.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

- ADRP** – Army doctrinal reference publication
- CCA** – Combat Command A
- CCB** – Combat Command B
- CCR** – Combat Command Reserve